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# REMINISCENCES OF AMERICAN HOTELS.

BY MAX O'RELL.

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THE American hotels are all alike.

Some are worse.

Describe one and you have described them all.

On the ground floor, a large entrance hall strewed with cuspidors for the men, and a side entrance provided with an awning, a sort of triumphal arch, for the ladies. On this floor the sexes are separated as at the public baths.

In the large hall, a wide counter behind which solemn clerks, whose business faces relax not a muscle, are ready with their book to enter your name and assign you a number. A small army of colored porters ready to take you in charge. Not a salute, not a word, not a smile of welcome. The negro takes your bag and makes a sign that your case is settled. You follow him. For the time being you lose your personality and become No. 375, as you would in jail. Don't ask questions. Theirs not to answer. Don't ring the bell to ask for a favor if you set any value on your time. All the rules of the establishment are printed and posted in your bedroom; you have to submit to them. No question to ask. You know everything, and nobody else in the house does. Henceforward you will have to be hungry from 7 to 9 A.M., from 1 to 3 P.M., and from 6 to 8 P.M. The slightest infringement on the routine would stop the wheel; so don't ask, for instance, if you could have a meal at 4 o'clock; you would be taken for a lunatic, or a crank, as they call it in America.

Between meals you will be supplied with ice-water *ad libitum*.

No privacy. No coffee-room, no smoking-room. No place where you can go and quietly sip a cup of coffee or drink a glass of beer with a cigar. You can have a drink at the bar, and then go and sit down in the hall among the crowd.

Life in an American hotel is an alternation of the cellular system during the night and of the gregarious system during the

day ; an alternation of the penitential systems carried out at Philadelphia and at Auburn.

It is not in the bedroom either that you must seek anything to cheer you. The bed is generally good, but only for the night. The room is perfectly nude. Not even "Napoleon's Farewell to His Soldiers at Fontainebleau," as in France, or "Strafford Walking to the Scaffold," as in England. Not that these pictures are particularly cheerful ; still they break the monotony of the wall-paper. Here the only oases in the brown or gray desert are cautions.

First of all, a notice that, in a cupboard near the window, you will find some twenty yards of coiled rope which, in case of fire, you are to fix to a hook outside the window. The rest is guessed. You fix the rope, and—you let yourself go. From a sixth, seventh, or eighth story the prospect is lively. Another caution informs you of all that you must not do, such as your own washing in your bedroom. Another warns you that if, on retiring, you put your boots outside the door, you do so at your own risk and peril. Another is posted near the door, close to an electric bell. With a little care and much practice you will be able to carry out the instructions printed thereon. The only thing wonderful about the contrivance is that the servants never make mistakes.

Press once for ice-water.

“ twice “ hall-boy.

“ three times for fireman.

“ four “ “ chambermaid.

“ five “ “ hot water.

“ six “ “ ink and writing materials.

“ seven “ “ baggage.

“ eight “ “ messenger.

In some hotels I have seen the list carried to number twelve.

Another notice tells you what the proprietor's responsibilities are, and at what time the meals take place. Now, this last notice is the most important of all. Woe to you if you forget it ! For if you should present yourself one minute after the dining-room door is closed, no human consideration would get it open for you. Supplications, arguments, would be of no avail. Not even money.

“ What do you mean ? ” some old-fashioned European will exclaim. “ When the *table d'hôte* is over, of course you cannot

expect the *menu* to be served to you ; but surely you can order a steak or a chop."

No, you cannot ; not even an omelette or a piece of cold meat. If you arrive at one minute past three (in small towns, at one minute past two), you find the dining-room door closed, and you must wait till six o'clock to see its hospitable doors open again.

When you enter the dining-room, you must not believe that you can go and sit where you like. The chief waiter assigns you a seat, and you must take it. With a superb wave of the hand he signs to you to follow him. He does not even turn round to see if you are behind him, following him in all the meanders he describes amidst the sixty, seventy, sometimes eighty, tables that are in the room. He takes it for granted you are an obedient, submissive traveller who knows his duty. Altogether I travelled in the United States for about ten months, and I never came across an American so independent, so daring, as to actually take any other seat than that assigned to him by that tremendous potentate, the chief waiter. Occasionally, just to try him, I would sit down in a chair I took a fancy to. But he would come and fetch me, and tell me that I could not stay there. In Europe the waiter asks you where you would like to sit. In America you ask him where you may sit. He is a paid servant, and therefore a master in America. He is in command, not of the other waiters, but of the guests. Several times, recognizing friends in the dining-room, I asked the man to take me to their tables (I should not have dared go by myself), and the permission was granted with a patronizing sign of the head. I have constantly seen Americans stop on the threshold of the dining-room and wait until the chief waiter had returned from placing a guest to come and fetch them in their turn. I never saw them venture alone and take an empty seat without the sanction of the waiter.

The guests seem struck with awe in that dining-room, and solemnly bolt their food as quickly as they can. You would think silence was enjoined by the statute-book. You hear less noise in an American hotel dining-room containing five hundred people than you do at a French *table d'hôte* accommodating fifty people, at a German one containing a dozen, or at a table where two Italians are dining *tête à tête*.

The chief waiter at large hotels in the North and the West is

a white man ; in the South he is a mulatto or a black ; but white or black, he is always a magnificent specimen of his race. There is not a ghost of a savor of the serving-man about him : no whiskers and shaven upper lip reminding you of the waiters of the Old World ; but always a fine mustache, the twirling of which helps to give an air of nonchalant superiority to its wearer. The mulatto head waiters in the South really look like dusky princes. Many of them are so handsome and carry themselves so superbly that you find them very impressive at first, and would fain apologize to them. You feel as if you wanted to thank them for kindly condescending to concern themselves about anything so commonplace as your seat at table.

In the smaller towns the waiters are all—waitresses. The waiting is done by damsels entirely—and also by the guests of the hotel.

If the Southern head waiter looks like a prince, what must we say of the head waitress in the East, the North, and the West ? No term short of queenly will describe her stately bearing as she moves about among her bevy of reduced duchesses. She is evidently chosen for her appearance. She is “divinely tall” as well as “most divinely fair,” and, as if to add to her importance, she is crowned with a gigantic mass of frizzled hair. All the waitresses have this elaborate coiffure of curls, rolls, and bangs. It is a livery, as caps are in the old world, but instead of being a badge of servitude, it looks, and is, alarmingly emancipated ; so much so that, before making close acquaintance with my dishes, I always examined them with great care. A beautiful mass of dishevelled hair looks very well on the head of a woman, but *one* in your soup, even though it had strayed from the tresses of your beloved one, would make the corners of your mouth go down and the tip of your nose go up.

A regally handsome woman always “goes well in the landscape,” as the French say, and I have seen specimens of these waitresses so handsome and so commanding-looking that, if they cared to come to Europe and play the queens in London and Paris pantomimes, I feel sure they would command quite exceptional prices, and draw big salaries and crowded houses.

How grand this lady is, as she approaches you, darts a look of supreme contempt at you, flings a spoon and fork and knife down on the table in front of you, and, turning her back upon you, gabbles off the *menu* in one breath !

The thing which, perhaps, strikes me most disagreeably in the American hotel dining-room is the sight of the tremendous waste of food that goes on at every meal. No European, I suppose, can fail to be struck with this ; but to a Frenchman it would naturally be most remarkable. In France, where, I venture to say, people live as well as anywhere else, if not better, there is a perfect horror of anything like waste of good food. It is to me, therefore, a repulsive thing to see the wanton manner in which some Americans will waste at one meal enough to feed several hungry fellow-creatures.

In the large hotels, conducted on the American plan, there are rarely fewer than fifty different dishes on the *menu* at dinner-time. Every day and at every meal you may see people order three or four times as much of this food as they could under any circumstances eat, and, picking at and spoiling one dish after another, send the bulk away uneaten. I am bound to say that this practice is not only observed in hotels where the charge is so much a day, but in those conducted on the European plan—that is to say, where you pay for everything you order. There I notice that people proceed in much the same wasteful fashion. It is evidently not a desire to have more than is paid for, but simply a bad and ugly habit. I hold that about five hundred hungry people could be fed out of the waste that is going on at such large hotels as the Palmer House and the Grand Pacific Hotel of Chicago,—and I have no doubt such five hundred hungry people could easily be found in Chicago every day.

I think that many Europeans are prevented from going to America by an idea that the expense of travelling and living there is very great. This is quite a delusion. The price of houses, clothing, and servants is far higher than in Europe, but there the difference stops, I believe. For my part, I find that hotels are as cheap in America as in England, at any rate, and railway travelling in Pullman cars is certainly cheaper than in European first-class carriages, and infinitely more comfortable. Putting aside in America such hotels as Delmonico's in New York, the Thorndyke in Boston, the Richelieu in Chicago, as you would the Grand Hotel in Paris, and the Savoy, the Victoria, the Metropole in London, and taking the good hotels of America, such as the Grand Pacific in Chicago, the West House in Minneapolis, the Windsor in Montreal, the Cadillac in Detroit (I mention those I remember

as the very best), you will find that in these hotels you are comfortably lodged and magnificently fed for from three to five dollars a day. In no good hotel of France, England, Germany, Switzerland, would you get the same amount of comfort—or even luxury, I might say—at the same price, and those who should require a sitting-room would get it for a little less than they would have to pay in a European hotel.

The only very dear hotels I have come across in the United States are those of Virginia. There I have been charged as much as two dollars a day, but never in my life did I pay so dear for what I had ; never in my life did I see so many dirty rooms or so many messes that were unfit for human food.

But I will just say this much for the American refinement of feeling to be met with, even in the hotels of Virginia, even in the “lunch”-rooms of little stations : you are supplied, at the end of each meal, with a bowl of water—to rinse your mouth.

MAX O'RELL.